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# Lay Female Devotional *Lives* in the Counter Reformation

## Abstract

In 1563, the Catholic Church responded to the Protestant challenge to the religious life as the most holy feminine state with the maxim *aut maritus aut murus* (wife or wall). The navigation of that dictum by early modern women across Catholic Europe has arguably been one of the dominant themes in the scholarship over the last thirty years. Certainly, there had always been the opportunity for women to lead a religious life outside of marriage and the cloister as *beatas*, tertiaries and beguines. Yet it was after the Council of Trent (1545-63) that women had to renegotiate a space in the world in which they could lead spiritually-fulfilling devotional lives. If this was one unintended legacy of 1517, then the quincentenary of the Reformation seems a timely moment to reflect on new directions in the now burgeoning historiography on lay women in Counter-Reformation Europe.

## Introduction

Martin Luther's conception of women as the intellectually-inferior sex was conventional and unchallenging when compared with his more revolutionary ideas about female sexuality and marriage. Indeed, scholarly opinion remains divided over whether the Reformation impacted positively or negatively on the lives of women in early modern Europe. Traditionally, the reformers' opposition to the cult of the Virgin Mary was envisaged as emblematic of their misogyny. However, their challenge to the religious life as the most holy feminine state granted certain concessions to married lay women. *Aut maritus aut murus* was the response of the Catholic Church in 1563 but, as Merry Wiesner Hanks noted, by then women had a

greater "range of options" available to them than the dictum suggested.[1] Certainly, there had always been the opportunity for women to lead a religious life outside of marriage and the cloister as *beatas*, tertiaries and beguines. Yet the new diversity of devotional lives outside of the cloister and the renewed charitable activism of lay women arguably grew out of the processes of Catholic spiritual renewal which crystallised in the century following the emergence of Protestantism. After the Council of Trent (1545-63), women had to renegotiate a space in the world in which they could lead spiritually-fulfilling devotional lives. If this was one unintended legacy of 1517, then the quincentenary of the Reformation seems a timely moment to reflect on new directions in the now burgeoning historiography on lay women in Counter-Reformation Europe. This article focuses in particular on the diversity of female religious experiences highlighted by recent scholarship in the field, before going on to explore how women themselves constructed and reflected upon their spiritual identities.

## "Walking the Tightrope?"[2] "Devout Laywomen" in Counter-Reformation Europe

In 1988, Kathryn Norberg lamented the lack of scholarly interest in Catholic laywomen, nuns and *filles seculières*; she invited historians to balance the scholarship on Protestant women with a more sustained analysis of Counter-Reformation female lives.[3] Almost three decades later, the diversity of female religious experience across early modern Catholic Europe is of enduring scholarly interest.[4] We are continuing to discover how female spirituality found

[1] Merry Wiesner Hanks, "The Reformation of the Women," in *Gender, Church, and State in Early Modern Germany: Essays by Merry E. Wiesner* (London, 1998), 75.
[2] This is Laurence Lux-Sterritt's expression, in "Mary Ward's English Institute and Prescribed Female Roles in the Early Modern Church," in *Gender, Catholicism and Spirituality*, eds. Laurence Lux-Sterritt & Carmen. M. Mangion (London, 2011), 93.
[3] Kathryn Norberg, "The Counter Reformation and Women Religious and Lay," in John W. O'Malley (ed.), Catholicism in Early Modern History: A Guide to Research (St Louis, 1988), 133-46.
[4] The field is of course too vast to cite comprehensively here. A few key recent works on Germany, Spain, France, and Italy are: Simone Laqua-O'Donnell, *Women and the Counter-Reformation in Early Modern Münster* (Oxford, 2014), Elizabeth A. Lehfeldt, *Religious Women in Golden Age Spain: The Permeable Cloister* (Aldershot, 2005), Barbara Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris* (Oxford, 2004), Mary Laven, *Virgins of Venice: Enclosed Lives and Broken Vows in the Renaissance Convent* (London, 2002).

expression in rich material cultures of devotion and music.[5] It is becoming increasingly clear that women were avid readers of devotional texts and innovative contributors to the production of different genres of religious literature.[6] A recent flourishing of scholarship on English nuns in exile has also uncovered networks of female religious on a transnational scale.[7] One theme which seems to be of continued importance is the potential for female devotional lives in all their forms, even if entirely orthodox, to challenge and subvert the boundaries of the institutional Church. Scholars have revealed, for example, that in the post-Tridentine context, nuns "routinely challenged, negotiated and transcended" the enclosure that the Catholic Church imposed on the female religious in 1563, and on all holy women in 1566 and 1568, as Elizabeth Lehfeldt has observed.[8] The scholarly consensus is now that convents were more "permeable" than traditionally supposed: nuns had important economic, social and cultural links which extended beyond the convent wall and "the world" also made its way into the cloister in a variety of ways.[9]

The experiences of women who eschewed enclosure altogether is perhaps the most recent expression of this theme. Seventeen years ago, Silvia Evangelisti called for scholars to turn their attention to the "third way" – that is, to women who took vows of celibacy outside of

[5] See, for example, the essays in *Female Monasticism in Early Modern Europe: An Interdisciplinary View*, ed. Cordula Van Wyhe (Aldershot, 2008). On conventual material culture and relics, see Ulrike Strasser,"Bones of Contention: Cloistered Nuns, Decorated Relics and the Contest over Women's Place in the Public Sphere of Counter-Reformation Munich," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschicte/Archive for Reformation History*, 90 (1999), 255-88 and Silvia Evangelisti, "Monastic Poverty and Material Culture in Early Modern Italian Convents," The Historical Journal, 47, no. 1 (2004), 1-20.

[6] On women and writing, see Thomas M. Carr (ed.), *The Cloister and the World: Early Modern Convent Voices* (Charlottesville, 2007).

[7] The most recent here is Laurence Lux-Sterritt, *English Benedictine Nuns in Exile in the Seventeenth Century* (Manchester, 2017), Jenna Lay, *Beyond the Cloister: Catholic Englishwomen and Early Modern Literary Culture* (Philadelphia, 2016) and Jaime Goodrich, *Faithful Translators: Authorship, Gender and Religion in Early Modern England* (Chicago, 2013).

[8] Elizabeth A. Lehfeldt, "The Permeable Cloister," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Jane Couchman (London, 2013).

[9] Lehfeldt, *Religious Women in Golden Age Spain*. On the influx of lay retreatants into convents in France, see Barbara Diefendorf, "Contradictions of the Century of Saints: Aristocratic Patronage and the Convents of Counter-Reformation Paris," *French Historical Studies* 24, no. 3 (2001), 469-499.

the monastic life, or otherwise "blurred the boundaries" between marriage and the cloister.[10] In this regard, the Anglo-American scholarship was lagging behind Italian and German work which had already begun to complicate the "wife or wall" binary.[11] It has since caught up and there is now a growing corpus of literature on tertiaries, beguines and other groups of women whose mode of piety has often been described as "semi" or "quasi" –religious. In some cases, women lived in communities as "penitents," "spiritual virgins" or "spiritual widows." In other scenarios, women lived within the familial structures of marriage or widowhood, but did so celibately.

The goal of these women was, of course, not insubordination. The various modes of religious life that emerged in Catholic Europe after Trent were products of female attempts to contribute to a collective Counter-Reformation which was never at odds with the objectives of the institutional Church.[12] This was a story of careful negotiation – of "walking the tightrope" - as much as defiance. The initially successful circumvention of *Periculoso* by Mary Ward (1585-1645) and her English Ladies is well known.[13] In France, Susan Dinan has shown how the Daughters of Charity maintained their status as a "confraternity" in order to successfully avoid claustration.[14] The work of Quericiolo Mazzonis has revealed the "a-institutional" devotional life which Angela Merici offered to women via the Company of

[10] Silvia Evangelisti, "Wives, Widows, and Brides of Christ: Marriage and the Convent in the Historiography of Early Modern Italy," *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (Mar., 2000), 247 and n55.
[11] Anne Conrad, *Zwischen Kloster und Welt. Ursulinen und Jesuitinnen in der katholischen Reformbewegung des 16./17. Jahr-hunderts*. (Mainz, 1991). Much of Gabriella Zarri's earlier work was published in the series of essays *Recinti: Donne, clausura e matrimonio nella prima età moderna* (Bologna, 2000). She also discusses the "Third Status" in an article translated into English in "The Third Status," in *Time, Space and Women's Lives Early Modern Europe*, eds. Anne Jacobson Schutte, Thomas Kuehn, and Silvana Seidel Menchi (Kirksville 2001), 181-199.
[12] Susan Dinan, 'Overcoming Gender Limitations: The Daughters of Charity and Early Modern Catholicism,' in *Early Modern Catholicism: Essays in Honour of John W. O'Malley*, eds. Kathleen M. Comerford and Hilmar M. Pabel (Toronto, 2001), 108.
[13] Laurence Lux-Sterritt, *Redefining Female Religious Life: French Ursulines and English Ladies in Seventeenth-Century Catholicism* (Aldershot, 2005); Lux-Sterritt, "Mary Ward's English Institute and Prescribed Female Roles in the Early Modern Church."
[14] Susan Dinan, *Women and Poor Relief in Seventeenth-Century France: The Early History of the Daughters of Charity* (Aldershot, 2006). See also Matthieu Brejon de Lavergnée, *Histoire des Filles de la Charité: XVIIe – XVIIIe siècle: la rue pour cloître* (Paris, 2011).

Saint Ursula.[15] Those who dedicated their lives to religious devotion but as celibate lay women also had to confront their decisions to do so outside of the cloister. As Barbara Diefendorf has noted, laywomen, particularly the unmarried or widowed, had chosen an unconventional spiritual path which needed to be legitimised – especially if they were to be regarded as exemplary, or even saintly.

Many of the terms historians use to discuss these women are sloppy and "imprecise."[16] "Devout laywomen" has been helpfully been coined as an umbrella term encompassing the religious lives of beguines, *beatas*, penitents and spiritual virgins and widows across post-Tridentine Europe.[17] The problem remains, however, that many of our historical actors would not have identified with these categories. As Caroline Walker Bynum cautioned, many women labelled as "semi-religious" were not aspiring to the conventual life and binding religious vows.[18] Neither would many beguines and *beatas* describe themselves as "lay." Whilst accessing the "self-conception and self-understanding" of these "in between" women is a perennial and sometimes insurmountable challenge, scholars have begun to recover the subjectivities and collective identities that could help us to confront these issues.[19] In what remains of this article, I would like to offer a small contribution to this endeavour by exploring how lay, female-authored spiritual biographies might be one (albeit rare) source for perceiving how women expressed and reflected upon their spiritual status.

[15] Querciolo Mazzonis, *Spirituality, Gender, and the Self in Renaissance Italy: Angela Merici and the Company of St Ursula (1474-1540)* (Washington, 2007), xi.
[16] Alison Weber, "Devout Laywomen in the Early Modern World: The Historiographic Challenge", in *Devout Laywomen in the Early Modern World*, ed. Alison Weber (London, 2016).
[17] Ibid.
[18] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Los Angeles, 1987).
[19] Marit Monteiro, "Power in Piety: Inspiration, Ambitions and Strategies of Spiritual Virgins in the Northern Netherlands during the Seventeenth Century," in Lux-Sterritt & Mangion (eds.), *Gender, Catholicism and Spirituality*, 119. "In between" women is Weber's phrase in, "Devout Laywomen."

## "A Purpose Beyond Biography?"[20] Lay Female Counter-Reformation Lives

Spiritual biographies or *vitae* were accounts of a devotional life and often composed as part of the "saint-making" process. Many scholars of early modern female religiosity in Spain, Italy and France have already turned to spiritual biographies to glimpse confessor-penitent relations, female devotional routines, and the construction of female sanctity – among other themes.[21] In the French context, biographies composed about nuns have been subject to extensive analysis by Jacques Le Brun, but the *vitae* of lay women remain less well studied.[22] The exception here is the leading work of Barbara Diefendorf who has used seventeenth-century biographies to recover both the personal piety and charitable devotion of female religious and laywomen in Counter-Reformation Paris.[23] As a source for lived experience, biographies must, of course, be approached with caution. These were texts organised via narrative tropes borrowed from hagiographic models, or saints' lives. As Anne Jacobsen Schutte observed in her exemplary essay on the printed biographies of Italian laywomen, "authors learned exactly what elements the lives of prospective saints, male and female, must contain."[24] Biographies, do, however, allow us to explore how a lay identity was perceived and represented. In other words, *vitae* are perhaps more valuable as a window onto biographers, than their subjects.

Particularly valuable for our purposes here then, are surviving manuscript lay biographies, penned by lay women. These "women on women" accounts are rarer in their survival than

[20] Elizabeth Rapley, "'Un tresor enfoui, une lampe sous un boisseau:' Seventeenth-Century Visitandines Describe Their Vocation," in *The Cloister and the World: Early Modern Convent Voices*, ed. Thomas M. Carr (Charlottesville, 2007), 157.
[21] The key example here is Jodi Bilinkoff, *Related Lives: Confessors and their Female Penitents 1450 – 1750* (Ithaca, 2005). There is some interesting recent use of biographies in Clare Copeland, *Maria Maddelena De' Pazzi: The Making of a Counter-Reformation Saint* (Oxford, 2016).
[22] Jacques Le Brun, *Soeur et amante: les biographies spirituelles féminines du XVIIe siècle* (Genève, 2013).
[23] Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*, 20-21.
[24] Anne Jacobson Schutte, "Ecco la santa! Printed Italian Biographies of Devout Laywomen, Seventeenth-Eighteenth Centuries," in *Devout Laywomen*, ed. Weber.

male-authored biographies, as Nicholas Paige has noted. [25] This is probably because women tended not to be the authors of "official" (read "published") biographies, but rather writers of manuscript Lives.[26] A full picture of the contributions which uncloistered women made to the narration of female devotional Lives in the Counter Reformation is yet to be recovered, but it is already clear that, in France at least, lay women were drafting biographies which were later published by more renowned male clerical authors.[27] Even a small surviving corpus of female-authored manuscripts can thus betray a broader culture of readership and circulation. It is my contention here that lay women were taking up the pen in order to praise, commemorate (and perhaps defend?) the spirituality of women who were "not quite nuns". In many ways, this mirrored the activities of the female religious who were writing and circulating obituaries in order to record the lives of their fellow sisters, as well as to serve as a testament to their collective devotional lives.[28] As Elizabeth Rapley puts it, these texts "had a purpose beyond biography."[29] Viewed in this way, "women on women" biographies provide unique glimpses of self-perception during an era when the Church asked women to choose *aut maritus, aut murus* – one path or the other.

Let us take, as an example, the spiritual biography of a woman who should have fulfilled Luther's characterisation as a "broad-hipped" female destined for life in the domestic sphere.[30] The spiritual biography of the married Counter-Reformation *dévote* Anne de Lamoignon (1605-1663) attests to some fairly conventional life choices for a noble woman.

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[25] "Women on women" is Nicholas Paige's phrase in "Enlightened (Il)literates: Problems of Gender and Authority in Early Modern Devotional Writing," in *Rethinking Cultural Studies 2: Exemplary Essays*, eds. David Lee Rubin and Julia V. Douthwaite (Charlottesville, 2001), 115-140.
[26] Paige, "Enlightened (Il)literates," p. 129.
[27] Compare, for example, the manuscript life of Marie de Bonneau, Madame de Miramion written by her daughter with the published version; a later manuscript copy survives at Bibliothèque Mazarine, MS. 2489 and the earliest published version is François-Timoléon de Choisy, *Vie de Madame de Miramion* (Paris : A. Dezallier, 1706).
[28] Rapley, "Un Trésor Enfoui," p. 157.
[29] Ibid.
[30] *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook*, eds. Susan Karant-Nunn and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks (Cambridge, 2003), 28.

In 1624 she married the *président à mortier* of the Parlement of Paris, François-Théodore de Nesmond (1598-1664) and they went on to have several children. Anne belonged to Vincent de Paul's charitable confraternity the Ladies of Charity (*Dames de la Charité*) and whilst she never formally professed, she does appear to have made an informal vow of celibacy within marriage. The biographer of this chaste married woman was the spiritual widow Marie Bonneau de Rubelle (1629-1696) (known as madame de Miramion). After her husband died during her fifteenth year, whilst she was also pregnant with their daughter, Marie took a lifelong vow of chastity in 1649. Her role in the establishment of the secular, female congregation the *Miramiones* is well-known to historians of the French Counter Reformation.[31] Anne and Marie were also related by marriage since Marie's daughter Marguerite, was married to Anne's son in May 1660.[32] The biography - which Marie undoubtedly wrote as an expression of these friendship and kinship ties - was never printed and survives in two manuscript versions.[33] Marie was also, incidentally, later the subject of a lay, female-authored biography which also survives in manuscript.[34]

Marie's strategy as a lay spiritual biographer appears to have been motivated by her desire to present the lay existence in the world as a path to salvation and possibly even saintliness. She devoted the early portion of the biography to the relation of Anne's thwarted plans to join both the Carmelite and Visitation orders when, at the age of eighteen, her marriage to François-Théodore de Nesmond was arranged. She was, asserted her parents, "too weak" to

[31] Elizabeth Rapley, *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Montreal, 1990).
[32] Mary L. Gude CSC. 'Madame de Miramion and the Friends of Vincent de Paul," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*, Vol. 20, no. 2 (1999), 246. Miramion's relationship with Anne and her role in writing the biography is also discussed here.
[33] The first is at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, and appears to be a later copy, BnF, Ms. FR. 14347, containing 104 pages. Another copy of the manuscript survives in the *archives privées* in the Archives Nationales, which is suggestive of a manuscript circulation within the family. Appended to this version of the biography is Anne de Lamoignon's testament and codicils along with her epitaph. I have consulted both versions but cite the BnF manuscript here. It is also relevant to note that Marie's biography of Anne also seems to have inspired the family to write and edit the "lives" of other Lamoignon women – including Anne's younger sister the unmarried *dévote* Madeleine.
[34] See note 27 above.

adhere to a rule so "severe" as that of the Carmelites and after consultation with "seven or eight" persons of "virtue" (her confessor among them) it was decided that she would not join the Visitation de Sainte-Marie either.[35] Many biographies published in France in this period begin with this familiar trope - where religious vocations are frustrated by parents or social obligations.[36] The paratexts of *vitae* also often contained apologetic defences of the spiritually-imperfect path biographees had chosen. When the Life of a lay woman was in the hands of a peer – that is, of a lay female biographer, the dynamic appears to have been different. In this instance, however, Marie did not present Anne's devout lay life as a less perfect, consolatory path to salvation. Instead, she sought to stress the spiritual contribution to the lives of others Anne had been able to make in the world. Tellingly perhaps, Marie does not refer to Anne as a "laywoman" ("laïque") at any point in the text; but she does stress that it was as a married woman that she could "serve as a great example" to others and this exemplarity would have been stifled by convent walls.[37] Whilst Marie never really construed this as Anne's choice, the lay devout life was being presented as a viable spiritual alternative to the religious life. This was re-emphasised later in the biography, where Marie describes Anne's advice to her own daughter Olive not to enter a convent without a vocation.[38] Even after Olive had taken the decision to profess, her mother visited the monastery regularly and, Marie tells us, bucked the trend of mothers who "are content once they have been unburdened of a daughter."[39] It is also telling that Olive joined the Franciscan Third Order community at the Conception de Notre-Dame house on the rue Saint-Honoré – which had been established

[35] BnF, Ms. FR. 14347, ff. 2-4.
[36] BnF, Ms. FR. 14347, ff. 2-4.
[37] BnF, Ms. FR. 14347, fol 6.
[38] BnF, Ms. FR. 14347, fol 47.
[39] BnF, Ms. FR. 14347, fol 49

in Paris in 1635.[40] She was therefore a tertiary who adopted a reasonably rigorous way of life, but retained the right to remain unmarried.[41]

In both Marie's relation of Anne's eschewal of religious vows and her account of her daughter's decision to join a Third Order religious community, the devout lay life thus began to emerge as a measured, sensible choice for pious women. There also appears to be a subtler critique at work here – both of forced religious vows and of "conditioned" vocations, where girls were being socialised to enter convents by negligent parents.[42] Of course, Marie had a profound respect for the religious life; she educated her own daughter in a Visitandine house in Paris and was not questioning the profession of binding religious vows in any way. In fact, Marie's strategy was to show how Anne conducted her life in imitation of the female religious. Accordingly, Marie configured Anne's relationships with her husband as replicating the moral sanctuary provided by the cloister. This is often direct and explicit in the spiritual language she used to describe the marital bond. Anne's submission to her husband, for example, was imagined by Marie as analogous to the convent hierarchy. She reported that Anne considered herself subjected to her husband "like a religious to her superior."[43] This was also a marriage which became celibate – instigated by Anne, according to Marie, as an expression of her "great piety" and "purity."[44] This seems more than simply a statement about Anne's feminine subservience; both her deference and later her celibacy also functioned to highlight how unspoiled this life could be.

In many ways, the stories that Marie chose to tell about Anne are prosaic and unremarkable. Much of the biography is dedicated to the narration of Anne de Lamoignon's devotion to

[40] MC/ET/XIX/423, 6 Février 1642.
[41] Diefendorf's study of their constitutions reveals that they scourged themselves once a week, *From Penitence to Charity*, 291, n.20.
[42] Elizabeth Rapley, "Women and the Religious Vocation in Seventeenth-Century France," *French Historical Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Spring,1994), 613-631
[43] BnF, Ms. FR. 14347, fol 37.
[44] BnF, Ms. FR. 14347, fol 43.

charitable work.[45] Anne's piety was entirely conventional and orthodox: she was obedient to her confessor, she read the fifteenth-century theologian Jean Gerson and memorised chapters of Thomas À Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*.[46] Her physical appearance also conformed to contemporary *dévote* standards: she never wore jewellery, her clothes were simple, and her arms and décolletage were always covered.[47] Yet it was precisely Anne's capacity for "perfection" in the world both as a "girl" and "married woman" which Marie presented as central to her friend's "great sanctity." [48] Further, in the deathbed narrative, Anne's dying words were reserved for dispensing advice and praising the efforts of "several Ladies of Charity of the parish" with "humility and charity."[49] It was also at this climactic point in the biography when Anne addressed her younger, unmarried *dévote* sister Madeleine (a "spiritual virgin") and counselled her about submission to her confessor. The biography once again becomes a medium for expressing a shared spiritual identity when Miramion inserts herself into the narrative in the relation of Anne's final words to Madeleine: "Madame de Miramion […] loves you, console yourself with her, submitting yourself as I have with all my heart to the will of God"[50]

Marie made no claims about a cult surrounding Anne after her death as many biographers did about "living saints," and merely noted that her passing was mourned by all. The biography

[45] BnF, Ms. FR. 14347, folios 21 to 31 in particular, but also 31 – 36, 61 – 75.
[46] BnF, FR 14347: on a unnumbered page in the third part of the biography, Anne is described as having memorised ("apris par coeur") the twenty-third chapter of the third book of the *Imitation of Christ* and been particularly attentive to the maxim: "Always hope that the will of God will be done and accomplished in you." See The Imitation of Christ by Thomas à Kempis: A New Reading of the 1441 Autobgraph Latin Manuscript, ed. William C. Creasy (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1989). In the fourth chapter of the biography on "son humilité" on an unnumbered page, Anne is described as having adhered to a maxim in the "twenty-third chapter" of Gerson's redaction of the *Imitation of Christ*: "Always search for the lowest place and be inferior to everyone."This could have been one of the many Latin or French editions of Gerson's work such as this seventeenth-century example: *IV livres de l'Imitation de Jesus* (Paris: Sebastien Huré, 1642). There are other references to her adherence to Gerson throughout the biography, see for example, the opening sentence of chapter five (unnumbered pages).
[47] BnF, FR 14347: references to her modest clothing come in chapter five on "her esprit de pauvreté et sa modestie" (unnumbered pages).
[48] BnF, FR 14347, folios 1-2.
[49] BnF, FR 14347, fol 98.
[50] BnF, FR 14347, fol 101.

appears to have been intended for modest circulation in manuscript and it was clearly held in high esteem by the Lamoignon family. At least one version of the manuscript wound up at the monastery of the Conception de Notre-Dame, where it had been gifted to the penitents there and copied. The family were important patrons of the Conception monastery and, as we have already seen, Anne's daughter Olive joined the Third Order in 1642. The biography may thus have been donated to the community to commemorate Olive's mother's death. Yet it also seems clear that Franciscan tertiaries were the ideal recipients of a biography which set out to celebrate the life of a chaste, secular woman.

## Conclusion

When devout women such as Marie de Miramion penned the Lives of their peers, they wrote to commemorate the saintly virtues of the recently deceased "Living Saints". Their oeuvres were often written with a particular agenda - be it canonisation or not - and narratives tended to conform to hagiographic patterns, and to the regulations asked of biographers by Rome. In the case of Anne de Lamoignon's biography, this was also about the mutual self-promotion of two families who were leading the Counter-Reformation in Paris. These issues aside, lay female biographers can provide valuable insight not only into the religious lives of lay women whose stories have not yet been brought to light by scholars; female-authored *vitae* also allow us to discern if and how women reflected on their liminal spiritual status.

Scholarly interest in the women who were not "quite nuns" continues to develop and we are gradually achieving a fuller picture of the different life choices that pious women made in post-Tridentine Europe. Prudent directions for future research on these lives have been identified by Alison Weber in a 2016 essay collection which is now surely the go-to volume for historians of female religiosity outside of the cloister. Rather than restate these, in this

article I have explored how Lives might be one source for responding to some of the questions already identified. Studying the devout laywomen of Counter-Reformation France may help to balance the fuller historiography on Spain and Italy, as Weber invited, but the challenge which has yet to be taken-up by scholars is the broader, comparative study of lay female experience across early modern Europe.

I hope, nonetheless, that the single, Parisian case study I have presented here is helpful for thinking more about how early modern devout laywomen perceived their own spiritual identities. French *dévotes* such as Anne de Lamoignon and Marie de Miramion clearly both recognised that a devotional life conducted in the spaces between the convent and the world defied categorisation. France seems to me to be particularly fertile ground for the further study of these "in between" women using *vitae*. A closer inspection of the vast numbers of surviving spiritual biographies composed in French convents, for example, has the potential to reveal much more about women whose devotional lives were conducted on the margins of conventual life than has so far been supposed. It is clear that, in some cases, lay female patrons who participated in the devotional lives of convents as boarders (*pensionnaires*) and retreatants were envisaged as part of those spiritual communities and even contributed to the writing of convent Lives.[51] Lay women were thus not only writing the lives of their lay peers, but also of the female religious with whom they so often associated. They were also Excavating the process of writing and circulating *vitae* may be another key to understanding how female devotional lives could transcend formal boundaries.

[51] I have begun to explore the role of lay women in writing the life of Catherine de Bar, Mère Mectilde du Saint-Sacrement (1614 – 1698) in a paper delivered at the 2017 RECIRC conference at the National University of Ireland, in Galway; the unpublished paper was entitled: 'Mademoiselle de Vienville and her 'glorious enterprise': Writing the life of Mère Mectilde du Saint-Sacrement (osb).' Here I argued that across several versions of Mectilde's "lives" there was a concerted effort to flesh-out the details of the lives and spiritual experiences of lay women who were inextricably linked to Mectilde. For example, lay boarders or *pensionnaires* contributed to the writing of the life of Mère Mectilde in MS. P101, Archives des Bénédictines du Saint-Sacrement, Arras, and Ms. N249, Archives des Bénédictines du Saint-Sacrement, Bayeux. I am grateful to Sister Marie-Hélène Rozec, osb, of the Monastery at Craon for access to these manuscripts.